

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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SONORAN PRONGHORN ANTELOPE TEAM ESTABLISHED

The 100 to 150 surviving Sonoran pronghorn antelope that live in the harsh desert country along the Arizona-Mexico border are the subjects of an intensified effort to restore this endangered animal to a healthy state in the wild.

An endangered species recovery team under the leadership of John E. Phelps, game biologist, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix, was established recently by Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Other team members include Monte Dodson of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Robert Furlow of the Bureau of Land Management, and Ezekiel D. Jaramillo of the National Park Service.

The pronghorn antelope is the only living representative of a group of hooved animals that evolved in North America. Both sexes carry horns which are shed annually after each breeding season. Pronghorns have large eyes and long, pointed ears. The wooly undercoat is overlaid with fairly long, straight, coarse, and brittle guard hairs. By flexing certain skin muscles, the pronghorn can literally make its hair stand on end. Cold air is excluded when the hairs lie smooth and flat, but the hairs may be erected in the desert sun to allow air movement to cool the skin. The hair that stands on end is especially prominent on the white rump and it is used as a danger or warning signal.

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The pronghorn antelope is the swiftest mammal in the New World, able to run as fast as 45 miles per hour on hard ground with 10 to 18 foot leaps. Its cruising speed is approximately 28 miles per hour. These animals roam in small scattered bands throughout the summer but congregate in herds which may number up to a hundred or more individuals in the winter. Strong group leadership is evident in the herds. Old bucks are occasionally solitary. Pronghorns shift from one area to another several times in a year (or change elevation) to seek water or food, but the does usually remain with the kids at lower altitudes.

Pronghorns can see objects several miles away and are curious animals; if they do not scent an object and it does not move suddenly or otherwise alarm them, they will often approach it.

Recent estimates indicate that only about 100 to 150 Sonoran pronghorn antelopes survive in the United States, with a larger but declining population in Mexico. Counting and study have been hampered by their low numbers spread over vast areas of desert.

Poaching and excessive livestock grazing have been the principal causes of decline. Their preferred habitat is small, isolated patches of grassland scattered across the desert; because of the region's low rainfall (averaging four inches per year), these grasslands are delicate and easily disrupted by excessive livestock use.

The recovery team will collect more information on the status and needs of the antelope, and then draw up a comprehensive recovery plan. An international cooperative agreement between the United States and Mexico, so that all antelopes on both sides of the border will be protected, is the animal's best hope for survival.

The Sonoran pronghorn is one of two geographic races of the pronghorn whose numbers have fallen to the danger level. (The other, the peninsular pronghorn, once ranged through Baja California but now is reduced to a few remnant groups; it has been formally proposed for addition to the endangered species list.)

The other two races of the pronghorn range across the prairie from Texas and the Dakotas to California and Oregon. Originally they existed by the millions, but indiscriminate shooting and competition with livestock reduced them to a few thousand by 1925. The public arousal led to Federal programs to establish ranges and provide funds for State programs. More than 300,000 exist today.

The Sonoran pronghorn is distinguished from other races by its pale coloration and certain features of the skull.